
On the Living Dead

Reflections on the
Problem of the Negro
for (Anti-) Humanism

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*“Black is neither in the object nor in the
World, it is what man sees in man, and that
in which man sees man.*

*Black isn't merely what man sees in
man, it is the only “colour” inseparable
from the hyper-intelligible expanse of the
universe.*

*Solitude of the man-without-horizon who sees
Black in Black.”*

- Francois Laruelle, “Universe Black in the Human Foundations of Colour”

“It's not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery ... Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. They have had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true.”

- Toni Morrison, “Living memory: a meeting with Toni Morrison” (from Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (1999))

“His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

- Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

With consideration to the zone of (non)being which must be understood as blackness, both humanist and anti-humanist theories of the subject become insufficient to consider the black, to defend her in light of imagining metaphysical violence rather than a violence which metaphysics destroys.¹ The concept of “will” which effects the subject’s relation to itself (the ‘I’) is overturned by the black experience, for the will does not simply imply the capacity to act and do, but distinguishes the autonomous agent from the enslaved. The notion of will is re-examined in the anti-humanism of Nietzsche, for instance, who identifies force with the phenomena of will, apart from a subject who conditions the exercise of force. This conception of a ‘really’ non-unitary subject implies a narrative progression between multiplicity, i.e. the plurality of feelings which comprise the will, and identity, i.e. the synthetic attribution of the command, obedience to it, and thus the action itself to a single commander called ‘I’; Nietzsche recounts this narrative in the second essay of his *Genealogy of Morals* as the origin of responsibility, which is encapsulated in the psychological axiom that pain is the most potent mnemonic. Regarding the nihilistic asceticism of his contemporaries, Nietzsche notes that—for the pessimists, for example—suffering is often the first argument against existence, while in earlier days, men judged that they could not dispense with the infliction of suffering as “a veritable bait of seduction to life.” But perhaps, Nietzsche continues, pain did not hurt as much as it did now, since pain does not have the same effect with the Negro, “granted that these are taken as representative of prehistoric man.”²

The slave isn’t considered to be indignant against the senselessness of her suffering as the white man is. This is why rape is unimaginable in the construction of black female sexuality, and the repression of the rape of enslaved women was “essential to the displacement of white culpability that characterized both the recognition of black humanity in slave law and the

designation of the black subject as the originary locus of transgression and offense.”³ The violence of punishment destroys the punished’s capacity to know herself as a relational being and necessitates the production of a fiction to make sense of her world as it is being unmade, and hence, primarily functions as a mnemonic. In effect, punishment produces concentration, sharpens the consciousness of alienation, and strengthens the power of resistance.⁴ The inflicting of pain on a subject who is unable to reciprocate recognizes and negates their will, affirming their autonomous agency by temporarily suspending it. Under the law, the violence considered necessary to maintain the submission of the subject to the proper legal relations is exercised according to limits, identified as ‘degrees’ of *force*. In slave relations, this notion of force is dissolved since there is no limit to the violence necessary to maintain black submission; there is no limit of anti-black violence which can be exceeded in order to render the black body legible in the law. Slave women were only recognized by the law with regard to consent and will “in order to intensify and secure the subordination of the enslaved, repress the crime, and deny injury, for it asserted that the captive female was both will-less and always willing.”⁵

The figure of the black slave, especially the slave woman, disrupts an imagined *a priori* connection between affect and world and poses an antinomy of the philosophical subject which reduces itself to other antinomies which form a sketch of a generalized “transcendental dialectic” of the humanist and anti-humanist subject; among these are antinomies are those between real and logic (substance/reflection; *jouissance*/unconscious; lived/thought; affect/representation), between intuition and inference, between subjectivity and objectivity (or, immanence and transcendence; givenness and position, etc., which never overlap), between identity and multiplicity, and between the subject’s internal constitution and its situation within a philosophical system.⁶ Adjacent to the pursuit of a black philosophy which displaces the

assumption of a stable and philosophical vantage point for the black metaphysician, I propose a new practice of black philosophy, or rather, a *blackened* practice of philosophy, which detaches philosophy (black or otherwise, humanist or anti-humanist) from its own authority: a black *non-philosophy* in the mode of the thought of Francois Laruelle—a unified theory of philosophy and science, philosophy and art, ethics, etc., which renounces a meta-philosophical ideal and specifies itself as a theoretical and pragmatic discipline by the suspension of philosophical claim over the Real and the transcendental reduction of philosophy to simple material. “Non-philosophy is a practice of philosophy that is heteronomous to it but no longer heteronomous to man—whereas philosophy's spontaneous practice is autonomous for itself and heteronomous to man.”⁷ This is our point of departure in constructing a humanism (or anti-humanism) without the-human, which is necessarily exclusive to the black subject-position.

Non-philosophy resonates with the concepts and aims of some other more philosophical theorists to whom I am indebted and find useful for developing a blackened project of (anti-) humanism, a defense of the tradition of the oppressed—particularly, the New Humanism of Frantz Fanon, the materialist feminism of lesbian theorist Monique Wittig, and the materialist historiography of Walter Benjamin. I find in these thinkers a gesture towards the equation *Man=Real=Utopia*, which Laruelle proposes in response to the utopias we call philosophies.⁸ As a black woman (more specifically, a black lesbian; further still, a black transgender lesbian), I experience a subject-position from which it feels much more secure, if not *necessary*, to reduce philosophy and its representations into simple material without authority in themselves. A non-standard philosophy, or non-philosophy, intervenes in the knowledge already produced by sciences and philosophies, using them and orienting them different; it is a transcendental tool “for modifying the course not of the object itself but of the knowing of the object, and an

immanent usage of this knowing.”⁹ We know that, from Marx, philosophy is the spiritual weapon of the working class, which only *interprets* the World without changing it. The worker’s claim to the World is authenticated in the wage, i.e. the value that the capitalist concedes to the worker in exchange for the use of their labor-power. The slave is found on neither side of the wage relation, and is thus not present as an individual in the mode of production, which is coextensive with the world of the-human:

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.¹⁰

Marxist philosophy rests on a fundamental principle of distinction between the real and thought which implies two essential theses: (1) the materialist thesis of the primacy of the real over thought about the real, i.e., thought about the real presupposes the existence of the real independent of that thought; (2) the materialist thesis of the specificity of thought and of the thought process, with respect to the real and the real process, i.e., all the operations of thought by which the real is thought and conceived belong to the order of thought, which must not be confused with the order of the real.¹¹ Like any philosophy, Marxist philosophy is characterized by a fractal matrix of 2/3 terms: an interiority (or immanence) and an exteriority (or transcendence) *simultaneously*, in a synthetic or hierarchical structure, the one overcoming the other in turn. This matrix of the Philosophical Decision is the identity of a double relation of philosophy to itself: on the one hand, an identity of 2/3, wherein the synthesis is immanent to the

dyad of interiority/exteriority, philosophy being in need of itself; on the other hand, an identity of 3/2, wherein the synthesis is transcendent to the dyad, philosophy being in excess of itself.

Through this structure, philosophy claims to determine itself in the absence of a non-philosophy, beyond all its empirical determinations which it calculates in order to prescribe it in an *auto-position* which cannot be conceived by philosophy or limited otherwise, for the auto-positional syntax is identical to philosophy's claim to reach the Real and thus to at least partially constitute it, or co-determine it. Non-philosophy postulates a Real which escapes auto-positioning, a One which does not unify but which remains in-One, a Real which is immanent (to) itself rather than to a form of thought, which given without-position and without-givenness.¹²

Returning to the Laruellian equation (*Man=Real=Utopia*), a sketch of the resonance(s) I find between non-philosophy and the aforementioned theorists (i.e., Fanon, Wittig, Benjamin, and Stirner) primarily comes into view as a dissociation between Man and History. Man is not determined by history; by definition, Man is that which cannot be subordinated to the World. Non-philosophy aims to operate an inversion which places philosophy in exclusive dependence on Man, such that it is now her instead of philosophy that is defined in such a manner that she can determine the possibility and meaning of this new service of philosophy. The World, being the immanent object of philosophy, can only be transformed by philosophy in an ideal or representational mode. Genuine transformation of the World consists in determining representation through an agency that is without-representation which is thought by means of representations that have been reduced to the status of philosophically inert materials.¹³ A genuinely transformative practice is transcendental through its radical immanence in the Real and therefore heterogeneous to all representation, but nothing prevents it from being sufficiently heterogeneous to these representations to be able to transform them. Humanism and anti-

humanism are 'blackened' through the transcendental reduction of philosophy into simple material, by which man is liberated from the domination of philosophy and an essence which is controvertible with its properties. This theoretical practice for philosophy leaves behind the subjection of humans, and thus the subjection of blacks, by positing a series of axioms:

- 1) "Man," "ego," "subject," "human(s)" are no longer concepts but primary names posed in axioms.
- 2) Primary names are terms extracted from philosophy but abstracted from their naive intuitive horizon, from the world of metaphysical objects and representations. Their signifying base serves as a support for an alternative logic, an alternative organization of thought which we will call "non-philosophy."
- 3) Non-philosophical thought and its theoretical practice is determined by its object, which we will designate by the symbol "man-in-man" ("in-man" for short or even "man" when the context precludes misunderstanding). Such thought is not derived or received from some external or philosophical source, and it has the power to abstract philosophical terms from the realm of meaning within which they normally function.
- 4) The "object" of non-philosophy, and that which determines it, is its cause: "man-in-man."
- 5) Man-in-man is not a concept or unitary entity. It is not amenable to definition: it is posited through real-transcendental axioms.¹⁴

To think the black in a fashion adequate to her (non)being, one must not simply turn the assumptive logic of philosophy on its metaphysical and ethical head, but overstep philosophy as a whole (humanist, anti-humanist, or otherwise), and produce a theory of the black subject which separates the Human (i.e. Man-in-man) from the subject. The paradigm of Man-without-anthropology is the methodological proposal of non-philosophy. The principle of the solution to the humanist controversy is to divest Man of all her attributes. Man is the answer without (a) question. *There is no Man but Man.* The non-philosophical 'program-without-programming' inverts eschatology in order to present a new theory of salvation. Man in her radical subjectivity, as a negative determination rather than domination, is also named the Stranger, who does not

encounter the Other as an undecidable aporia, but is the radical form of the Other in person. Man brings the World to salvation through the subject and the humans struggling against the World arrive at salvation, i.e. the subject, because humanity is already given-in-Man. The black may be present, but it cannot be represented on her own accord and cannot be interpreted; she is the vision of a body which is not present in flesh and blood, a specter, a 'spook'. Black humanity is not only the excess of philosophy, but is a sort of imaginary number, which has its essence in the Real without adding or subtracting anything to the Real itself. The black subject, in a strict sense, never escapes the matrix of philosophical decision because it never 'was' there in the object of philosophy in the first place. The fractural rendering of the slave into 3/5 of a "man" cannot stand as an event which is in any sense singular. The black, as ex-slave and quasi-slave, has an experience that is not a matter of memory. Since violence is not an event which has any effect on the black's metaphysical fortitude, the event horizon of her fragmentation is not a narrative moment, but *being* itself. In resistance to totalization of Man to a history from the survivors, the experience of the 'in-past' is a living-without-life which breaks with the present and hence cannot be subordinated as simple material for philosophy. This in-past is found in a future which is without-place (i.e. utopia) and without-time (i.e. 'uchronic'): the Future-in-person, which is Man.

The dissociation of Man from History is a radical inversion of eschatology which can be extracted from the work of Fanon, Wittig, and Benjamin and lends itself to an axiomatic 'non-politics' which frees the Other from its undecidability in the philosophical style of thought. The Other is first, but now in a radically autonomous way as the Other-in-Other rather than a One-Other who is the instance of absolute transcendence. Responsibility for the Other then does not apply itself as an undecidable of democracy as in the work of Derrida or Levinas, but is a certain

decision imposed upon political thought so as to render itself just and remove its self-contradiction regarding democracy. Democracy axiomatically decides itself as real; the Real is the phenomenal content of democracy, not as a function nor a political regime but the instance of politics itself. Man as the existing-Stranger-subject is given as the real, i.e. transcendental, presupposition on the basis of which subjects produce themselves as means of existence with the participation of their political existence in the world.¹⁵ The non-philosophical rendering of Man into an ultimatum, a subject *for* the world rather than a being *in* the world, postulates identity as already manifested before the manifestation of being and thought and in its own mode of identity in-Ego. The concept of the-(revolutionary)-subject becomes inert and sovereignty becomes immanent (to) itself. Liberation from difference, whether one of race, sexed identity, class, or otherwise, is not an ideal to be reached, but a practical task, a performance or posture, rather than a position.¹⁶ The Stranger is heterogeneous to the World so that she does not need its representational matrix to make a stand for herself, but is sufficient to transform that matrix. That struggle for transformation consists in *writing* (which is) the subject...constantly reactivating letter and meaning, endlessly, as Wittig says. The subject here (existing-Stranger-subject) is not a synthesis but “a non-positional refusal (of the) self, an immanent or lived “non-” that knows itself but without apprehending itself or possessing itself as what it is.”¹⁷

Fanon rejects blackness as much as he rejects whiteness and indeed considers decolonization as an agenda of disorder against the colonial system, but also the creation of new men. Wittig takes up lesbianism as a refusal of the heterosexual social contract, positing the lesbian as the only figure which is beyond the categories of sex (man and woman), but also collapses the dialectic between the One and the Other into the singular non-subject of Man. Benjamin identifies legal violence as the mythical manifestation of violence, juxtaposing to it a

‘divine violence’ which is the absolute disruption of the mythical, or representational, matrix and stems from the guilt of the Lived, which consigns the living to a retribution that rectifies the guilt of mere life and purifies the guilty, not of guilt, but of law.¹⁸ Divine violence, which is synonymous to “sovereign violence”, suspends the authority of representation and dissolves the boundaries which mythical violence upholds, like those between life/death, Good/Evil, human/animal, divine/profane, and so on. The violent ordering of the black’s world, the violence by which the black African’s social fabric has been destroyed and their systems of reference, lifestyles, modes of dress, and traditions have been erased, is vindicated by the violence of the immanent rebellion. Democracy which institutes itself axiomatically cannot be considered a political regime, nor an attribute of political order or of a subject. Determined in-the-last-instance, democracy is the Real which transforms the World. It is impossible to describe democracy because it does not ‘exist’ but (is) in the Real.¹⁹ The radical subjectivity of the Stranger constitutes the axiom of democracy as *the* institution of politics, which is not the exercise of power but a mode of relation practiced by a kind of subject who is defined by participation in the contradiction of the fact of ruling [*archein*] and being ruled [*archesthai*].²⁰ Sovereignty must be immanent (to) itself, consisting in a definition of the political subject as undefinable, a subject-without-predicate, and therefore, the Man-in-person whose nature has never been political or anything else.

The black project of non-humanism is an *a priori* defense of Man as the Real foreclosed to philosophy. This is the principle of Fanon’s call against the instrumentalization of Man at the conclusion of *Black Skin, White Masks*²¹ and the ‘mystical conception of history’ which Benjamin speaks of in “Theologico-Political Fragment.”²² Only Man-in-person consummates all of history because Man is what cannot be subordinated to history or the World. As Future-in-

person, Man is not the goal of history but its end to which nothing historical can relate itself on its own account. The future is foreclosed to the Thought-World of philosophers' interpretations and Man is a tabula rasa, determining representation in-the-last-instance rather than being-determined. The defense of the black body cannot be a defense of the black body as such or as anything else—the black body is always already absolutely Other from any register of representation as “innocent” and this is why we must put Man before representation. Man is her foundation, constituted in non-philosophy as the object of axiomatic decisions. ‘So long live Unreason,’ Wittig says in “Homo Sum.”²³ Man can be subordinated to harassment of any interpretation or knowledge exterior to her actual lived experience. To recognize ‘history’ as only *a* history and that the experience of the in-past is not a memory strips the future of its magic without turning into homogeneous, empty time. Historical materialism renders the future without-futurity. In response to Rousseau, Wittig notes that if there is something *real* in his ideas of the social contract, “it is that we can form ‘voluntary associations’ here and now, and here and now reformulate the social contract as a new one, although we are not princes or legislators.” She continues, “*Is there mere utopia?*”²⁴ My answer would have to be a resolute ‘yes.’ Utopia is the permanent changing of terrain that history and philosophy seek. Given that Man is her own foundation, Man does not need to change terrain and if as a subject she ends up changing terrain it is because she is thrown by and as this Future into the World.²⁵ “Man is a ‘yes’ resonating from cosmic harmonies.”²⁶ This black project is a response to both Afropessimism and Afrofuturism and resolves the antinomy of a community without past imagining possible futures by considering the future foreclosed to materials of a past which can interpreted, read, or indexed. There is no black mission, but only the practical task of transforming the world, a task whose method Benjamin calls *nihilism*²⁷: the production of an insufficient or negative utopia.

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- ¹ Patrice Douglass and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Violence of Presence: Metaphysics in a Blackened World," *The Black Scholar* 43.4 (Winter 2013): 122
- ² Friedrich Nietzsche, "Second Essay: 'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscience,' and the Like" in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Horace B. Samuel (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2006), 39
- ³ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 79-80
- ⁴ Nietzsche, "Second Essay," 51
- ⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 81
- ⁶ Francois Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 80-1
- ⁷ Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013), 10
- ⁸ Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Anthony Paul Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), 10
- ⁹ Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 12
- ¹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology, Part I (selections)," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 107-8
- ¹¹ Louis Althusser, "The Object of Capital," in *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 1997)
- ¹² Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 4-5
- ¹³ Laruelle, "What Can Non-Philosophy Do?" *Angelaki* 8.2 (2003): 185
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 186
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 178
- ¹⁶ Laruelle and Anne-Francoise Schmid, "Sexed Identity," *Angelaki* 19.2 (2013): 39
- ¹⁷ Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, trans. Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015), 37-8
- ¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1978), 151
- ¹⁹ Laruelle, "Is Thinking Democratic? Or, How to Introduce Theory into Democracy," in *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, ed. John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 232
- ²⁰ Jacques Ranciere, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory and Event* 5.3 (2001): accessed August 8, 2007, doi: 10.1353
- ²¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 206
- ²² Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1978), 155
- ²³ Monique Wittig, "Homo Sum," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 56
- ²⁴ Wittig, "On the Social Contract," 45
- ²⁵ Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, 9
- ²⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xii
- ²⁷ Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," 156